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PORTLAND CENTER STAGE

The Guide
A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Threesome
By Yussef El Guindi

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Yussef El Guindi: Playwright

source: www.silkroadrising.org

Yussef El Guindi’s most recent productions include Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World (winner of the Steinberg/ American Theater Critics Association’s New Play Award in 2012; Gregory Award 2011; Seattle Times’ “Footlight Award” for Best World Premiere Play) at ACT, and Language Rooms (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award, as well as ACT’s New Play Award), co-produced by Asian American Theater Company and Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco; as well as at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia.

His plays, Back of the Throat, as well as Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda’s and Karima’s City, have been published by Dramatists Play Service. The latter one-acts have also been included in THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT PLAYS: 2004-2005, published by Applause Books in 2008. His play Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith, is included in SALAAM/PEACE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF MIDDLE-EASTERN AMERICAN PLAYWRITERS, published by TCG, 2009.

Yussef is the recipient of the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award.

And in his own words from an interview with the Wilma Theater

Source: The Wilma Theater www.wilmatheater.org

“I was born in Egypt; moved to London when I was 4. Went to school there until I was 17. Spent a year in Paris. Then went back to Cairo for my undergraduate degree in English and Comparative Literature. From there, I went to Carnegie-Mellon University for a graduate degree in Playwriting. Kicked around San Francisco for a couple of years after that, doing brief stints as a reader at the Magic Theater and as a dramaturg at the Eureka Theater. I landed a position as playwright-in-residence at Duke University for 7 years. Then moved to Seattle, where I pursued poetry, acting, film-making, before finally settling down to write plays full time. That’s the short and dirty. Actually, the short and dry.

In between all that one-thing-following-another, life sort of happened. And some sort of voice happened. Facilitated, I think, by my getting my citizenship in 1996. That event, strangely, concentrated the mind wonderfully. It gave me a subject matter. Or rather, it brought together a bunch of amorphous elements and subterranean emotions that were in effect, but to which I just couldn’t give a name to, or find a coherent story for. And that story was the simple one of the immigrant journey. One that had begun when my family left Egypt when I was 4. Becoming a citizen, in a way I hadn’t anticipated, plugged me into that unique template that belongs to this country in particular. Few countries owe their national character, and very reason for being, to the immigrant. This country got to be what it was with journeys such as mine. Millions of little such journeys. In Europe, if you’re an immigrant, you will always remain a foreigner, no matter how long you stay in England or France, etc. You will never quite be English or French. In America, some may gripe at immigrants, but this country’s life blood depends on them. Becoming a citizen plugged me into my own journey. Strangely. It allowed me to write about it.”
Interview with Yussef El Guindi for Threesome
Interviewed By Claudie Jean Fisher, Public Relations and Publications Manager, Portland Center Stage

First, where are you as you respond to these questions? What are you working on right now?

I’m in Egypt. I’m currently co-adapting, along with Philip Kan Gotanda, the Japanese epic The Tale of the Heike for ACT-Seattle. I am also working on a play called The Talented Ones. It will be part of University of California at Santa Barbara’s Launch Pad series in the spring.

In 2013, Threesome was featured at JAW, PCS’s annual festival for playwrights. What was attending JAW like for you?

It was an invigorating, very supportive and fun experience. Also nerve-wracking, as it always is with any new script; i.e., “Does my script suck?” or: “Could this possibly work?” and: “Why did I pick a profession where my limited skill-set is put on such public display?” These are the sorts of questions that plague me as I prepare a new play for its first staged reading. But outside of those irksome soul-searching, and sometimes soul-crushing questions (and answers), it was a really positive experience. I’ve been to several play festivals and JAW stands out for the generous emotional and practical support it gives to the playwrights. Plus we all went bowling, which I hadn’t done in 20 years.

Has the script changed much since the initial staged readings at JAW?

The JAW festival showed me what kind of play I had, and what sort of work it still needed as I moved forward. The type of reworking I’d begun in JAW was continued after the festival was over.

What information about this play emerged for you during those two weeks at JAW?

That it needs lots of work! Mostly in terms of cutting, shifting a few sections around, clarifying certain timelines and modulating the tone. There’s a hard tone shift between acts 1 and 2, so part of the rewrites involved planting more seeds of act 2 in act 1.

Also, there’s no getting around the necessity of a live audience to help illuminate your piece. It directly, and immediately, informs what kind of play you have wrought — with every response, or lack of one, with every laugh, or impatient shift in their seats, et cetera. I liken a playwright’s acute sensitivity to audience reaction to what the child of an alcoholic, or a child living with an unpredictable parent, must go through. You have to note everything about their responses if you want to give your play a chance for survival. I know there are playwrights/theater artists out there who are hostile to audiences, and even do very well with that attitude. That’s not my approach. I tend to be a reflexive people-pleaser. Which is not a bad impulse to have given the sometimes dark material I grapple with. It lightens the load. It’s the spoonful of sugar that helps the sense of injustice and rage that so often runs through my plays go down a little easier. It transforms that rage into something palatable (I hope) and something that you might even gladly want to swallow.

How would you describe Threesome in three sentences?

Threesome is essentially about a woman, Leila, trying to reclaim her own sexuality, and the province of her own body, after a violent sexual assault. If the first act is above-the-bed-cover lightness, in the 2nd act we slip beneath those bed covers, so to speak, and learn about the emotional turmoil and devastation that informed the actions of the three characters in the first act. The physical bodies we are amused by initially become flayed to reveal the damaged emotional lives beneath later on.

Could you tell us a little about how this story came about? What was your impetus for tackling this topic?

My imagination, that slithers about out of conscious sight most of the time, knows more about the plays I start writing then my conscious self does. I don’t outline; I follow some impulse and see where it leads. So I sort of play catch up with what my imagination starts spewing out on to the page. So with this play, without quite knowing what’s what, I found two people in bed chatting. By the end of that first page, I realized they were waiting for a third person to join them in bed. Two or three pages in and I had a sense of who these characters were, what was going on, and a sense of how it would end. While I don’t outline, I do like to have a sense of the overall arc of a play. I usually get that pretty early on in the process.

What informs my plays is usually some abiding and festering sense of injustice about something. I came to understand the play was about a woman asserting her right to her own body — after being sexually assaulted. The character Leila is an Egyptian. During the Egyptian revolution, a number of women experienced sexual assaults in the crowd. My sense was that whatever the revolution brought about, it could not really call itself a revolution until the mind-set, the
societal license that unofficially sanctioned these assaults, at least among certain elements in that crowd, were radically changed. (There was also a strong counter-movement that arose among the protestors to address those assaults.)

As always when I write plays that involve Middle Eastern characters, I try to find parallels that a Western audience might be able to relate to. In this case, it would be that the violence some Egyptian women experience is also experienced by American women in other contexts. Straddling two worlds, I find the self-righteousness of some commentators on the Middle East a little galling as they attempt to paint a picture of the “other,” in this case Arabs and Muslims, as somehow being a special kind of animal. “They engage in this kind of reprehensible behavior,” pundits will posit, “while we are so much more civilized and treat our women differently, with respect, and greater equality,” et cetera. When the fact is, of course, that American women experience the exact same kind of violence, sexual and otherwise. There is male privilege and a diminution of women right here in the States as well, in spite of all the rhetoric and stated policies.

The first act of Threesome starts out as a comedy, but you end up tackling such difficult subjects. Explain your use of comedy as an entryway in this play. How do you think it serves the way the story unravels for viewers?

I didn’t start out to write a comedy. I have sometimes begun a play with the intention of writing a comedy, but not with Threesome. In general, I have an amused point of view with most things I write about. I think we’re funny as a species (almost as funny as cats). So even when I stray into dark areas, I still find human behavior weird and comical at times. The comedy in Threesome is situational. We become a little funnier when we’re naked, and sexually awkward — in that we make ourselves so very vulnerable in those situations. A slight turn (new information, a different context) and that vulnerability can also then become heart-wrenching. But the intention was not to be funny. It’s that the characters find themselves in a very awkward, and somewhat comical, situation. When their situation shifts, so does the tone of the play.

There is a point in Threesome when what laughter there is ceases. We are smack-dab in the middle of two people’s pain. It’s a hard transition. But for me the play is all of one piece. We just discover as the play progresses that what we laughed at sits atop a painful history.

Would you speak a little about what it has been like being an Egyptian American during such a turbulent time in Egypt?

I left Egypt when I was 4. I returned to do my undergraduate degree there and have been back frequently since (I return once a year). Given that my formative years were spent outside Egypt, my perspective has always been that of a “khawaga” (foreigner). It is both my birthplace, a very familiar place, but it’s also emotionally a very complicated place for me. Home, but not quite home. I have, of course, followed closely the ups and downs of life there post-revolution. While I have experienced the country’s vicissitudes on a visceral level, I am still not quite in the thick of it. Which is both a relief and a loss.

It would be a very different experience to witness Threesome as a movie or television show, compared to seeing it live in a theater. How much do you think about that when you’re writing? Why do you think the live theatrical experience works as an effective vehicle for this story?

I am first and foremost a writer for the stage for all the usual reasons theater artists give for live performances. It is live! It lives there and then, as you witness it. And as you witness it, you are in dialogue with the play unfolding. There is a direct and immediate interaction between theater artists and audience; and that interaction informs the experience of the evening for both parties. While I have been involved in some film/TV projects, I still find those mediums somewhat impersonal. They reach wider audiences of course, which is nice, but I still prefer my story tellers to be in the same room with me in real time. Theater will never go away — in spite of reports of it being rushed into the emergency room now and again. The social intimacy of live performance speaks to something very primal in us.

With Threesome in particular, we are right there as the characters experience the sexual awkwardness that takes place. It makes that awkwardness, and the pain the characters expose to each other later on, all the more visceral. Film might give you an equally valid visceral ride (the Close Up is very handy), but there’s no substitute for live actors on stage flaying their emotional selves in real time. Or wondering how to get a threesome going.
The character of Leila is such a challenging and powerful role. Could you talk a little about your inspiration for this character?

I come from a family of very strong women. While there is of course a strong paternal/patriarchal paradigm in place in a lot of areas around the world, including Egypt, I think it’s a Western Orientalist tic to want to perceive Middle Eastern women as passive individuals waiting to be rescued by Western enlightenment. A lot of women from that region would beg to differ. The situation is much more complicated and nuanced on the ground. When one talks of writing three dimensional Middle Eastern characters, one is really just talking about presenting characters that have their own moral agency (and are not mere background props for the Westerner-in-the-Middle-East narrative). Also, something as simple as having the right to engage in conversations that aren’t fraught with the latest Western headlines about the region, or to fall into any of the tropes Westerners have of the region, and of the sexes there (e.g., all Middle Eastern women are fragile, abused, put-upon creatures, and somewhere in the play/film/TV show, the Arab/Muslim male is sure to slap her, because, well, according to these stories, that’s just what Arab/Muslim males do. They can’t help themselves. Or so we are led to believe).

I’ve wanted to introduce more layered and nuanced Middle Eastern characters in my plays. There seems to be a dearth of them in most entertainment in the West.

Yussef El Guindi and the Politics Of Conflicted Allegiances

By Michael Malek Najjar

Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi is arguably the most prolific Arab American playwright working today. His works have been widely published and anthologized, and his plays have been performed at many of the most prestigious regional theatres nationwide. El Guindi’s work primarily focuses on the lives of Arab/Muslim Americans hailing from Egypt, El Guindi’s own ancestral homeland. El Guindi’s protagonists, who are either first or second generation immigrants, are often caught between their primary allegiance to their Arab countries of origin and their obligatory allegiance to their adopted homeland, America. It is in this interstitial space that his characters live, work, and struggle to find a balance between these opposing worlds.

This issue of conflicted allegiances is often at the heart of Arab American drama. There are approximately 3.6 million Arab Americans living in the United States, and the majority of new Arab immigrants come from Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon. Many Arab Americans have dual citizenships, travel frequently to the Middle East, and have relatives living in their countries of origin. This condition leads to a duality in the minds of Arab Americans who often feel torn when U.S. foreign policy is in direct conflict with their homelands. Given the Israeli-Palestinian situation, America’s imbrication with oil producing nations, the “Arab Spring”, the Iraq War, and the ongoing war against the so-called “Islamic State”, Arabs living in America struggle to find acceptance in an increasingly hostile socio-political environment. Arab American playwrights like Heather Raffo, Betty Shamieh, Leila Buck, and Yussef El Guindi have often made this theme central to their works.
El Guindi creates characters in a state of infinite spectrality where they are neither at home in the Arab world nor accepted in American society. In his play *Back of the Throat*, a young Muslim man named Khaled is interrogated in his apartment for his suspected involvement in a terrorist attack; in *Language Rooms* an Arab American translator working at a U.S. government black site is considered suspect because of his father’s political leanings; and in his play *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*, an Arab American actor is trapped in an entertainment industry that is only interested in his ability to portray terrorists. Repeatedly El Guindi attempts to understand how Arabs and Muslim immigrants work to negotiate their lives home and abroad. In an interview El Guindi told me:

A lot of my plays tend to explore that tension: The impulse of the immigrants who want to reinvent themselves and assimilate. But then finding the baggage they brought with them from the “Old World” can not be so easily discarded. Either because fingers are being pointed at them that make them feel very self-conscious of their “Old World” links, or because they can’t let go.

This immigrant status is reinforced by the antagonists in El Guindi’s plays who refuse to accept that one can be both Arab/Muslim and American. In *Back of the Throat*, the interrogator Bartlett refutes Khaled’s right to citizenship:

BARTLETT: “It’s my country.” This is your fucking country. Right here, right now, in this room with us. You left the U.S. when you crossed the line, you piece of shit... It’s galling—Sticks in my craw. To hear these people who got here two hours ago quote back to me Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers. They’re not his fucking fathers.

This denial of the rights and civil liberties of immigrants has a two-fold effect in El Guindi’s plays: first, it prohibits the immigrant from fully integrating into American society and, second, it causes the immigrants to turn on one another. In El Guindi’s play *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*, Arab American writers confront one another over the issue of being co-opted by the publishing industry for their orientalist appeal. “Don’t you get it?” failed Arab American writer Gamal asks. “They’re going to spit you out as soon as they’re done with you. You’re their Uncle Tom. The Good Muslim, the Good Arab who will confirm everything they want to hear.” Mohsen, the successful, co-opted Arab American writer responds, What have you done, my friend? Except tear people down who are trying to build something. A community. A force we can turn to. But I suppose you have that right. To come here and complain, and do nothing. I suppose that is being American too. I suppose there are many immigrant stories. Some are just a little more instructive than others.

El Guindi’s latest play *Threesome* is another instructive immigrant story. Leila carries within her the trauma of her assault during the revolution which causes her to act out—first in the bedroom through the notion of having a threesome, then in the photography studio where she is confronted by Doug’s sickening revelation and by her past sexual trauma. Like most Arab Americans, Leila may be living comfortably in the United States but a part of her is still back home dealing with the horrors she experienced there. El Guindi’s exploration of Rashid and Leila’s relationship, and their experiences dealing with the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution, examines the real cost of “the Arab Spring” on both the body and the psyche. Leila returns to her life in the United States but she is forever altered by her experience back home. She, like many other immigrants, must find a way to exist in a new world while grappling with the pain from the old one left behind.


